

Holidays in Berlin

As the 2013 holiday season approached, theatres and opera houses in Berlin were crowded with people coming to see many new productions and some revivals of popular favorites. The Deutsche Oper offered a merry and highly unconventional production of *The Barber of Seville*, directed by Katharina Thalbach whose acting and directing has made her a favorite in Berlin theatres. The setting was designed by Momme Röhrbein and the costumes were by Guido Maria Kretschmer.

As the curtain opened we saw a picturesque set of buildings upstage with a street in front and downstage a beach scene. A quarter moon in the sky and the delicately changing lighting showed that it was very early in the morning. Activity began during the overture: a man tried to coax his donkey across the stage, someone hung out washing from a tall building, tables and chairs were set out in front of a terrace restaurant, and a man on a tractor drove onto the street pulling a great dark box which he left in the middle of the stage. Count Almaviva appeared with a gang of street musicians to serenade Rosina. When she failed to respond he paid the men who then turned on him and took his hat, his scarf, and his shoes. Figaro appeared in jeans and a shirt to sing the famous aria describing the demand for his assistance in solving problems. The Count asked him for help and together they planned ways for the Count to get into the house in order to make love to Rosina. Then to the surprise and pleasure of the audience, the front of the box was lowered to reveal a stage. The central conceit then became clear: this was a transportable stage such as one sees in the famous Brueghel painting showing *commedia dell'arte* actors surrounded by people at a fair. Here the waiters, bathers, children, and workmen in modern clothes all became spectators observing the characters on the portable stage.

The characters in the opera proper (in which Figaro enables the Count to marry Rosina and save her from her covetous guardian) were costumed in the *commedia dell'arte* style. Figaro appeared as the standard Brighella, and Rosina wore a truly fetching Colombina costume. Domenico Balzani as Figaro was the epitome of the clever, exuberant servant and all the others were equally satisfying. If I could criticize Thalbach's direction it would be on two points. One, there were too many diverting activities during some of the arias. For example, when the Count and Rosina sang a duet center stage, downstage right a woman in a bikini took a shower. Two, there were a number of vulgar, tasteless gags. But they were a part of *commedia dell'arte*, too.



The Barber of Seville by Rossini directed by Katharina Thalbach at the Deutsche Oper. Photo: bollemedia / DOB

At the same opera house the annual Opera Gala was presented. This is a highly theatrical occasion on several counts. Outside the opera house there was all the aura of a Hollywood premiere: a long red carpet, bright lights, glamorous people arriving, smartly dressed plain clothes security guards, and newspaper reporters and television crews with all their equipment. In the lobby an orchestra played and waiters circulated offering glasses of champagne. A part of the theatrical element was the spectacle offered by the audience. The men wore tuxedos and black tie and the women wore incredibly beautiful, elaborate evening gowns, feather boas, and opera capes. It was quite like a scene in a play.

Peter Schmidt created a design not only for the stage but for the opera house as well. Great red ribbons hung from the boxes and there were projections of ribbons on the proscenium arch. The enormous breadth of the backstage was filled with a projection like a modern painting. As the evening progressed the picture continually changed. There were patterns of abstract art, masses of flowers, Renaissance set designs, and enlarged architectural elements. Schmidt designs ballets, operas, and interiors of theatres and concert halls throughout Europe.

The program began with highly dramatic presentations by the director of the Deutsche Oper, the mayor of Berlin, the vice chancellor of Germany, and others celebrating the Nineteenth Opera Gala in support of the AIDS Foundation. Among the numerous opera arias, duets, and ensembles that followed, one of the crowd pleasers was a Rossini aria sung by "the crazy queen of Baroque Opera" Simone Kermes who was wearing a fanciful sort of can-can costume. The emotional evening closed with the entire group of opera singers performing the final number from *Westside Story* with its message of hope. This annual event is

one of the most popular operatic presentations in Berlin, drawing people from all over Germany.

Given the many productions of frequently produced operas such as *La Traviata*, past and present, it is no surprise that directors devise new concepts seeking, one supposes, to bring new insights. Director Hans Neuenfels presented a stripped down, wildly costumed, violent production of the opera at the Komische Oper. In the program notes Violetta was characterized as a "prostitute" who enjoyed her life of "free love" as opposed to the usual depiction of a woman seeking true love although forced into the life of a courtesan. Throughout much of the opera she was shadowed by a scantily dressed leather-strapped man, apparently her sexual slave. In their first duet Violetta and Alfredo were dogged by this man, who ran between them, shoved Alfredo, and threw a knife to him, attempting to engage him in a fight. The setting was a bare, black stage with steel girders across the top and an occasional panel or two which moved on and off the stage. In the final scene Violetta was mostly hidden behind one of them and the elder Germont was disheveled and drunk on the floor.

The most effective moments were the final duet between Violetta and Alfredo (with nobody shoving them) and Violetta's aria before his arrival. In her earlier arias she engaged in extraneous business such as tearing one of her dresses to pieces or washing the elder Germont's shoes. Here we could fully enjoy her unusually rich soprano and her effective movements. Liana Aleksanyan as Violetta, Timothy Richards as Alfredo, and George Stevens as Germont were wildly applauded in the curtain calls, whether for their performances or for the total concept one could not say.



La Traviata by Verdi, directed by Hans Neuenfels at the Komische Oper. Photo: Monika Rittershaus

There are many tributes and memorials to the great Max Reinhardt in Berlin. His Große Schauspielhaus was torn down but his Komödie am Kurfürstendamm still exists. He opened it in 1924 with *The Servant of Two Masters* as the plaque in the charming lobby states. The interior of this intimate theatre looks as it did in photos from 1924. It was a perfect setting for *The 39 Steps*, an adaptation of Hitchcock's film which has been successful in England and America and is now playing for the second time in Berlin.

The director and star, Ingolf Lück, said of the play that all the elements of the film from the escape on the Firth of Forth Bridge and pursuit by airplanes is included, "We leave nothing out." Certainly the special effects, such as the shadow play of the airplanes, were a major part of the fun. The fifty roles were played by Lück and only three others, Nicola Ransom, Alexis Kara, and Oliver Dupont. Their amazing character switches delighted the audience. Particularly funny was a scene at the inn performed by Kara and Dupont playing the innkeeper and his wife and the criminals pursuing Hannay. Costumed like Madeleine Carroll in the film, Ransom caught the spirit of the comedy and seemed to have stepped right out of the twenties.

The theatre mirrored the aura of the play established by designer Gabriella Ansonio. Lück used the stage boxes to good effect, particularly when the villain's hand (with the joint of the little finger missing) stuck out through the curtain. With the frantic pace and the continual costume changes the four fine comedians must have been exhausted by the finale but they happily pranced about for the many curtain calls. The comedy was a clever tribute to Hitchcock and perhaps a nod to Reinhardt.

Another tribute to a director of the past was the production of *Carmen* at the Deutsche Oper. This is a reworking of the highly admired 1979 production by Peter Beauvais now directed by Søren Schuhmacker. The setting and costumes by Pier Luigi Samaritani were handsome and impressive; rather than drawing attention to themselves, they supported Bizet's music. Here the focus was on the orchestra and the singing, and the eight major roles were marvelous. The Deutsche Oper Chorus and the Children's Chorus (the Kinderchor) were also superb.

The movement and business contributed to the production but were never distracting. In the first act Carmen's seductive advances to Don Jose culminated in a slow backward movement as she held out a flower and he followed her as if hypnotized. The dramatic confrontation at the gypsy camp in the mountains was unostentatious yet effective. Micaëla wearing a simple blue dress attempted to draw Don Jose away but he kept turning back to Carmen, dramatic in red and black, as she lay on the ground where he had thrown her. Before the bullfight in the last act the children happily sang and performed a brief mock bullfight. When Escamillo and Carmen appeared they were literally a dazzling couple in their similar sequined costumes, Carmen's unconventional and independent character underlined by her appearance in toreador pants. As the couple stood together, not moving, singing their love duet, the sinister, menacing figure of Don Jose, the only other character on stage was seen as a dark shadow. This reappearance of the thirty-three year old production has proved to be very popular.



Carmen by Bizet, directed by Soren Schumacker at the Deutsche Oper. Photo: Bettina Stöß

Another production which calls up the past is the nineteenth-century ballet, *La Péri*. This long ignored ballet offered the set and costume designer Jordi Roig wonderful opportunities. The action moves from a harem (in which the bored Prince Achmed observes the dancers in their exotic oriental costumes) to a paradise populated by fairies called Péri. The change from an elaborately decorated room encircled by glass to a place with beautiful trees and delicate lighting not only seemed like a dream—it was a dream. Achmed lay on his sofa smoking his opium pipe and the beautiful Pérés appeared in white and pastel tutus with the Queen representing Achmed's vision of his ideal love. In the two leading roles Ekaterina Krysanova and Dinu Tamazlacaru fulfilled all the expectations of an audience used to dramatic, emotional, first-class ballet. Surrounding dancers performed a wide variety of movements and dances. The little-known ballet by Friedrich Burgmüller was first performed in 1843, and in a sense this is a happy rediscovery by the Staatsballet Berlin allowing it to demonstrate its capabilities. Vladimir Malakhov must be given credit not only for the excellent choreography and direction but for his recreation of an almost forgotten work.

Far from forgotten are John Cranko's choreography and direction for the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* performed now by the Staatsballet at the Deutsche Oper. One critic wrote that "Cranko's premature death can never be sufficiently mourned by the world of dance." Prokofiev's intense music is matched by the intensity of the dancing. The magnificence of the setting by Thomas Mika was appropriate to the status of

the Capulets. Upstage were classic elements of a Renaissance mansion fronted by a balcony extending across the entire stage. Here Juliet appeared to Romeo and later the funeral procession with her body moved slowly across. At the sides were great brocade panels as high as the house and quite wide. The great sweep of the dancing at the Capulet's ball, the fun and excitement of a carnival, the exuberant display by Mercutio of dancing and sword fighting, and the exquisite *pas de deux* of the two lovers took place on the wide empty space between the panels. The ensemble dancing was spectacular but naturally the audience cheered the most for Shoko Nakamura as Juliet, Jason Reilly as Romeo, and Alexej Orlenko as Mercutio. This *Romeo and Juliet* is typically described as "the brilliant Cranko version" of 1962. His *Onegin* is also part of this season's repertoire.

The production of *La Finta Giardiniera* at the Staatsoper is a combination of a past work and something brand new. The opera was initially a failure when it was performed in 1775 with a libretto by Guiseppe Petrosellini. Since that time many hands have been at work on it. In this new production at the Deutsche Opera, its director Hans Neuenfels both created a libretto and directed the production. It began with a scene between an old couple reminiscent of the pair in Strindberg's *Dance of Death*. They incarnate the theme of love/hate which goes through the opera and they comment on and participate in the action. At one point he appears with a bouquet of roses intended for a young woman and she comments "All men are vampires who seek young blood in order to forget their fear of death for a moment."

During the overture there were two pantomimes. One showed a couple struggling over an apple (Adam and Eve?) ending when the man strangles the woman. The next showed another couple arguing, which ended with the man stabbing the woman. That act sets the action of the opera in motion: he believes her to be dead, but she lives and pursues him disguising herself as a *finta giardiniera*, gardener in a rich old man's household. The action which followed showed many scenes between mismatched couples—nobody loves the right person. In the end the pretended gardener and her lover unite, but doubtfully.

Neuenfels and his designer Reinhard von der Thannen created a continually shifting scene, often against black drapes with large pieces of scenery moved on and off stage. At one point clouds of smoke filled the stage. An enormous sort of sculpture was in the middle of the stage in one scene, turning around as several couples moved about it. The final act showed a stunning picture of brilliant spheres representing the sun and the moon. In front of these were the two lovers, initially in coffins, then standing in a sort of rocky tunnel between the spheres. The evening lasted three and a half hours. The audience did not respond warmly until the curtain calls when the singers were applauded enthusiastically. The opera will probably attract audiences because of its dramatic effects although it is rather surprising Mozart—more like Strindberg with Mozart arias.



La finta giardiniera by Petrosellini, directed by Hans Neuenfels at the Staatsoper. Photo: Ruth Walz

One of the most highly touted productions of the season was Mozart's *The Magic Flute* which premiered in November at the Komische Oper. It is a work created by the director Barrie Kosky and the British Theatre Troupe 1927. It utilized current technology to present the opera as a combination of film animation and live performers. It is performed against a flat white background with many doors at different levels which open to reveal the singers. They are standing on small platforms and are surrounded by the wide expanse of animation. The production closely related to silent films and to comic book style cartoons. Many of the scenes end with the silent film technique of "iris out." What is normally recitative by the singers was projected on the screen in huge letters accompanied only by a piano. So the singers did not express these thoughts or share dialogue. Given the fact that they were usually on the platforms and the surrounding area was filled with intense, dramatic animations, their movements were limited—they mostly stood still.

The cartoon element included the presence of the Queen of the Night whose head only was seen at the top of a giant skeletal spider with enormous legs which stretched out over the stage, menacing Tamino and others as she sang. All we ever saw of Julia Novikova was her head. (I wondered if she ever heard of Leontyne Price's famous response when asked to dub the singing for the movie *Porgy and Bess*: "No body, no voice.") In Papageno's famous drinking scene he stood in the middle of the stage with his hands mostly in his pockets, while around him and above him pink elephants in cocktail glasses moved up and down. He was torn between an illustration of a gallows on one side and an enormous bomb on the other. When the bomb exploded, a huge "KA BOOM" flashed behind him. As the recitatives were eliminated the very funny courtship between Papageno and Papagena (at first disguised as an old woman) did not occur. He saw her as in a dream and after the bomb exploded, she appeared next to him in a sort of Las

Vegas showgirl costume.

The singing was wonderful, but one could not say that the singers had the usual opportunities to fully *perform* the roles. The audience enthusiastically applauded them, most of all the American soprano Maureen McKay as Pamina. She has a lovely voice and had the chance to move and gesture on the stage level. Some will call the production cutting edge and others kitsch. Whichever, it is sure to be one of the most popular operas of the season.



The Magic Flute by Mozart, directed by Barrie Kosky at the Komische Oper. Photo: Iko Freese

Technology is everywhere. Many of the operas and plays are based on a "concept" utilizing startling effects. Part of the reason the Staatsoper Unter den Linden has been closed is to introduce the most recent equipment for lighting and sound. Peter Mussbach's concept of *La Traviata* revolved around Violetta's illness and death. The program included articles about death and about lighting effects. The presentation itself was entirely funereal: a bare stage surrounded by black curtains. Encompassing the orchestra was a giant screen or scrim on which were projected images of rain and whirring flashes of various lights (reminding me of car headlights coming at you on the highway). The effects which went on throughout the opera were apparently indicative of what Violetta was experiencing as she neared death. She wore a white evening gown and all the other characters were in black. Frequently there was on a spot of light on a singer, the rest was darkness.

One effect of the focus on lighting and the design of a stage bereft of usual furniture, etc. was that the singers were able to move about and act their roles fully (although we couldn't see their expressions

because of the screen and the projections). Indeed, the second act, which centers on the elder Germont's demand that Violetta leave Alfredo and return to her old life, seemed almost like a strong one-act play. Alfredo Daza has a memorable baritone voice and a grand stage presence. Anna Samuil blended her fine soprano voice with his and was very moving in her pathos. The act ends with the father comforting the broken-hearted Alfredo. Pavel ?ernoch was wonderful as the tragic lover. He was equally impressive in the opera's production of *Madame Butterfly* as the wastrel Pinkerton. This production at the Schiller Theatre is always sold out.

As the audience enters they see a gigantic picture of a handsome, smiling man with a large fierce eagle in front of him and other symbols of America on the sides. This scrim was lifted to reveal a platform with traditional Japanese screens placed across it. Peter Sykora (costumes and setting) placed behind this a soaring cyclorama presenting visual effects which changed throughout the opera. The lovely costumes reflected the differences in the two cultures in the opera. Butterfly's wedding guests wore kimonos of various colors and carried open colorful parasols. A fine costuming effect occurred in the last act with Kate Pinkerton in a beige dress with a small bustle, a hat with a veil and carrying a closed parasol downstage right with Butterfly center stage in a beautiful white silk kimono.

One of the highlights of the opera should be the night when Butterfly waits for Pinkerton to return to her. She and her servant excitedly spread flower petals on the floor of the stage, but that didn't really affect the appearance of the set. I have seen a more effective staging in which they both brought arms full of cherry blossoms and spread them all around. The night passes with sundown, evening, dark night, hints of dawn, and full day. But in this production these changes were not seen in a beautifully prepared home, but with the scrim once more in place and only Butterfly's face near the fierce eagle to be seen. The music was so beautiful that the theatrical effect was disappointing. Belasco with his primitive lighting instruments did it better in 1900. Of course the success or failure of the opera hangs on whether Butterfly is wonderful or not. All the singers were marvelous, but the high points were the arias of Elizabeth Caballero who played the role to perfection. Pavel ?ernoch was so fine singing with her or alone that one wished his role were larger. But the curtain calls, the first and last for Caballero alone, were a storm of applause for this delicate geisha with a thrilling voice.

After the reunification of Germany, ensembles at several theatres in East Berlin were broken up. Some actors went to Dresden or Munich but many found new opportunities in Berlin. There are so many locales where actors perform, some in commercial plays such as *Arsenic and Old Lace*, some in readings at the Wirtshaus Moorlake, and some in the many criminal play theatres. For example, a very elegant three-course dinner and a play about a crime in the court of Friedrich the Great is in the Orangerie at the Charlottenburg Palace.

For many years Dagmar Manzel was a leading actress at the Deutsches Theater playing roles in the *Nibelungen*, classic plays, and Sartre's *The Flies*. Now she has a career at the Komische Oper where, among other things, she sings the role of the proprietress of the Little White Horse Inn, *Im Weissen Rössl*. She and the rest of the cast move through fancy dance numbers and romantic and comic songs in this merry, musical from the 1920s. It combines a kind of naughtiness and sexuality with a sweetly naïve plot line. The Feydeau-like plot has everyone trying to get into the favored bedroom in the inn, but almost nobody succeeding. The charm of the past with twentieths costumes seems to have great appeal—perhaps as a contrast to the irony, violence, and blatant scatology of many productions. Manzel is also performing a one-person presentation taken from the Brecht/Weill *The Seven Deadly Sins*. She follows this up with

the lead in *Kiss Me Kate*. Quite a change from Sartre.

The ever popular *La Bohème* at the Staatsoper in the Schiller Theatre was a delight musically and visually. As Mimi and Rodolfo sang their love duet at the end of the first act, the walls of the artists' garret separated and moved offstage revealing a view of the night with snow falling. It was a perfect picture of romance. The second scene was filled with an enormous crowd celebrating the joys of Christmas Eve as peddlers called out their various wares of candy, toys, cakes, and flowers. What we heard and saw was enhanced by the presence of a large group of the Children's Chorus of the opera. An immense lighted sign descended behind the crowd to set the scene for the Café Momus—a bright, shining M.

There followed the amusing demands for expensive food, Musetta's arrival with her rich old man, and the general happiness of the scene. Naturally the highlight was Musetta's Waltz with Anna Samuil as a seductive, fascinating Musetta. As the opera moved to the tragic conclusion the audience was entranced by the performances of Kristine Opolais as Mimi, Stephen Costello as Rodolfo, and the fine singing of all the other bohemians. The opera was framed by the presence of an old man sometimes sitting in a scene, other times at the side watching—a sign of age looking back at the exuberance and foolishness of lost youth.

A month in Berlin is not nearly long enough to engage in the myriad theatrical events ranging from new plays to familiar operas to musicals relating to the Blues Brothers. The vitality of the theatre scene is most impressive.

Yvonne Shafer has long had an interest in theatre and opera in Germany. She was the American Consultant for *The Iceman Cometh* at the Deutsches Theater. She presented several lecture performances for Amerika Haus including "Eugene O'Neill Onstage," "American Women Playwrights," and "Tennessee Williams' South" which she now performs in Europe and America. She has written twelve books and continues writing and presenting papers at conferences.
